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C O N F I D E N T I A L KINGSTON 001106

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CAR (BENT)
NSC FOR SHANNON
SOUTHCOM FOR POLAD AND J7 (RHANNAN)

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TAGS: JM PREL PGOV
SUBJECT: PNP INSIDER SHARES PREDICTIONS OF PRIME MINISTER'S RETIREMENT, SUCCESSION

REF: 04 KINGSTON 02898

Classified By: MARK J. POWELL FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (U) Poloff met on April 18 with Balfour Denniston, member of the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the People's National Party (PNP). Denniston discussed Prime Minister P.J. Patterson's expected plans for retirement in the next year, and the candidates who are likely to succeed him as party leader and Prime Minister.

¶2. (C) Asked by Poloff about recent rumors that the Prime Minister might remain in office longer than previously expected, Denniston said that it was likely that Patterson would retire in early 2006, perhaps in March or April. At the end of 2004, PNP insiders expected Patterson to step down as early as March 2005 (reftel). Denniston said that Patterson's motivations to extend his term include his desire to be succeeded by Finance Minister Omar Davies, whose lagging campaign would have more time to develop the longer Patterson delays his retirement. Denniston also said that Patterson would like to secure Jamaica's relationship with the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) before he steps down, and that he would prefer to attend the September G-77 meetings in New York while still in office.

¶3. (C) Offering an assessment of Omar Davies' campaign to succeed the Patterson, Denniston made it clear that he very much doubts that Davies will be successful. He explained that Davies is a politician whose power as Finance Minister far outweighs his popularity in representational politics. Davies is respected for ably handling a very technical and, to most voters, ethereal portfolio: managing the country's debt-laden finances. However, he does not command the same loyalty among his constituents as his more popular colleagues in Parliament.

¶4. (C) Denniston also commented on the candidacy of Portia Simpson Miller, Minister of Local Government, Community Development, and Sports. He proffered that, in contrast to Davies, Simpson Miller continues to be very popular, and that the race "is hers to lose." Simpson Miller's portfolio, he explained, is much more accessible to the voting public, and has allowed her to garner support and develop very strong relationships at the local level, even with many of the island's opposition Jamaica Labor Party (JLP) members of Parliament.

¶5. (C) Commenting on new JLP leader Bruce Golding's recent victory in the West Kingston by-election for a much-needed parliamentary seat, Denniston asserted that Golding's ascent to the official position of Leader of the Opposition is welcomed by the PNP. He suggested that the government called for the by-election early - which allowed Golding to represent the JLP in the parliamentary budget debate on April 21 - because the PNP considers Golding to be less of a threat, particularly in Parliamentary debates, than interim Opposition Leader Kenneth Baugh. (Comment: We suspect that Denniston was being disingenuous in describing the PNP's acquiescence to Golding's inevitable rise to opposition leadership, particularly given Golding's demonstrated debating strengths, and his very capable and highly regarded performance in the budget debate. End Comment.)

¶6. (C) Comment: Poloff has met recently with four different PNP insiders, all of whom have indicated that Patterson may delay his retirement beyond previous expectations. While one suggested that the Prime Minister would not step down until 2007, three offered March or April of 2006 as a likely retirement date. Each of them spoke of Patterson's desire to wrap up unfinished business and secure his legacy as his primary motivation to extend his term in office. Patterson has commented publicly that he will not lead the PNP into the next general election, to be held no later than October 2007, but has not revealed specific plans as to when he might demit office. Portia Simpson Miller remains the PNP frontrunner to succeed him, well ahead of National Security Minister Peter Phillips and Davies. Though Phillips and Davies both trump Simpson Miller in Jamaica's very important "credentials sweepstakes" (both hold doctorates), neither can match her clear rapport with most Jamaicans. The fate of the

candidates will be determined at the party's annual conference, usually held in September, where delegates will choose a party leader who, in turn, will run against Bruce Golding.

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